



RITUALS AND CEREMONIES DURING THE CHHALIVAN FESTIVAL OF THE NOCTES OF THE BORDURIA VILLAGE – A HINT AT USING FOLK CULTURE FOR PURPOSES OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The Noctes are the natives of Tirap district in Arunachal Pradesh in North East India. The objective of the present paper is to explore the folk cultural practices as found in some of the rituals and ceremonies of the Noctes that are similar to certain ceremonies observed by the Ahoms. The field study conducted in the Borduria village has been the basis of the analysis and appreciation of the Chhalivan Festival of the Notes' hint at using folk culture for purposes of English Language learning has also been offered to translate Nocte folk songs and prayers and use these in the school textbooks and for examination and evaluation purposes so that twin goals of cultural preservation and Nocte students' academic performance enhancement can be achieved.

KEYWORDS: The Notes, The Ahoms, The Chhalivan Festival, The Ancestral Spirits, English Language Learning.

Article History

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INTRODUCTION

The Noctes are the natives of Tirap district in Arunachal Pradesh in North East India. They believe themselves to have emerged from across Patkai range around the time when the Ahoms invaded Assam. Oral history of the tribe revolves around the cordial relationships between the Nocte chiefs and Ahom kings. This social, economy and political involvement has greatly influenced the socio-cultural practices of the Noctes.

The objective of the present paper is to explore the folk cultural practices as found in some of the rituals and ceremonies of the Noctes that are similar to certain ceremonies observed by the Ahoms. The field study conducted in the Borduria village has been the basis of the analysis and appreciation of the Chhalivan Festival of the Noctes. A hint at using folk culture for purposes of English Language learning has also been offered to translate Nocte folk songs and prayers and use these in the school textbooks and for examination and evaluation purposes so that twin goals of cultural preservation and Nocte students' academic performance enhancement can be achieved.

Chieftainship being the dominant characteristic of the society, the Nocte society and villages can be distributed under two paramount chiefs; that of Borduria and Namsang. Consequently, any Nocte society can be divided into three classes;

- The highest class or the chief clan called Lowang,
- The minister's class called Ngong-awang or Hoomdong, and
- The commoners known as Chhana or Hoomchha.

The Noctes, though once been influenced by Vaishnavism, are still strongly animistic when it comes to traditional rituals or worship. The tribe believes on the spirits of their ancestors and on various spirits in nature. They believe that even after death, their forefathers continue to exist in the elements of nature and continue to protect them and act as their guardian. The living offer them with prayers and Jumin(rice wine) and beseech them for their blessings. They also believe in the existence of benevolent and malevolent spirits in nature, whom they appease through prayers and sacrifices. They have learnt that the best way to survive is to stay in harmony with nature and all its supernatural forces

CHHALIVAN LOKU

Chhalivan-Loku is the agricultural cum New Year festival of the Noctes, which mark the sowing of millet seeds on the newly burned Jhum plot. It is celebrated every year in the month of January. It thus heralds the onset of a new Jhum circle and a new calendar year, according to which the various traditional activities are observed in the society. However, even though it is celebrated in every Nocte villages around the same time of the year, number of days of the festival and some rituals may vary from village to village.

In this respect, I have taken up Borduria village for detail study, as this village is famous not only for being the paramount village, but also for its observation of the Chhalivan festival in most befitting way. Whereas in most of the villages the festival is being celebrated for two to three days, Borduria celebrate it for five full days. Most of the rituals in all the villages remain the same, with certain additions in case of Borduria. The main days of the festival are as follows:

Day 1 Phamlam-ja: This means preparation day. On this day, people clean their house and keep the necessary things ready be used on the following days. Buffalos and pigs are butchered, and meat is preserved for the festive days when more guests and relatives from far and near are expected. Rice wine (Jumin) and rice beer (Kham) are kept ready in abundance and served freely.

Ritual wise, people pray to their ancestors and home guardian spirits. Jumin is being offered to them. People pray for a prosperous and healthy year ahead. Jumin play a vital role in Nocte social custom.

On this day, like the first day of Chalo-loku, people send a bottle Jumin to the eldest maternal uncle's home, to the eldest paternal uncle's home, to the grandparents and to the highest household (Hoomdong) of the respective clan. This wine is then offered to the ancestors by the receivers in the name of the sender and the whole clan, with prayers. This ritual tradition help keep the kins and clans in strong bondage of love, loyalty and respect. All the guest entering the house are expected to perform the same ritual of offering Jumin to the ancestors and other benevolent spirits before taking part in the feast. This ritual is performed by pouring off a portion of the Jumin while praying for the well being of the host family and self. The rest of the wine can then be taken by the performer.

Day 2 Chhalivan-ja: This is the main day of the festival. On this day, people go to the newly burned Jhum to sow millet seeds. However, instead of going to their own Jhum plot, people gather at the Jhum plot of the highest household of their respective clan. There, they build a small bamboo platform called Taam, where the eldest males of the clan share their foods in the afternoon. Clan meetings and discussions are being held on this occasion. Children learn and make friends with the other children in the clan. It is a joyous occasion where everybody enjoys singing, feasting, drinking and chatting.

Ritually, this is a very important day. On this day, in the household of the clan-head, a new fire is lit by rigorously rubbing bamboo sticks together, known as Wankhit. Fresh rice and fish (Haahbaanmin) are then separately cooked in this fire. This is distributed in small portions to every family in the clan. On the other hand, every family will put off the old fire in their respective houses and lit new fire taken from the clan-head's home. This symbolizes the onset of a new life, new energy, new Jhum, new hope, new spirit, new beginning and New Year.

The mistress of every household will collect Hihroom (leaf of certain evergreen plant with ritualistic importance) and wild banana plant's scab, wrap them in Nyaplin (leaf of certain plant), and when all the members of the household are present inside the house, she will pass it over the grain storage in the house. While leaving for the Jhum, she will step her left foot on these leaves. The belief behind this performance is that since the mistress is in charge of food materials, she should be the storehouse of good luck. Hence she should be the one to step on the lucky leaves. On her left foot, because Noctes believe that the left foot belongs to self, while the right foot or anything on the right side belongs to others.

In the Jhum, the female head of the clan will offer the Haahbaanmin to the Jhum spirit, and others (elders) will start offering Jumin while they pray for good crop and prosperity. The female head of every family will collect their share of Haahbaanmin, leave for their respective Jhum, and after offering it to the spirits for a prosperous crop year, they will sow the millet seeds and turn back for the clan-head's plot, where all will have the feast of the day. They will continue to enjoy until it's time to get home.

Back home, the female folks busy themselves with preparations for the next day, while the male members (seniors) would gather at the house of their clan's head to discuss on clan matters and also to rejoice.

Day 3 – Khaaknyong-ja: By the end of the third day, in many villages the festival comes to an end. However in Borduria, it is the starting day for yet another precious and rare ceremony, i.e. cockfight or Wojaankhaak. This ritual is not observed in any other Nocte village, or by any other tribe in Arunachal Pradesh. This cockfight ceremony has a two in one purpose; ritual and entertainment. For an outsider it is a game worth viewing, while for the insiders it is as symbolic and ritualistic as it is entertaining. There is an oral history on how the cockfight in Borduria village came into being. It is said that it was a ritual observed by the Ahom kings. When the paramount chief of Borduria came into friendly term with the Ahom kings as a result of salt trade, he decided to practice the ritual himself for the benefit of his people. It is also said and believed that certain Ahom king used to train even eagles to fight instead of cocks.

There is a particular ground to observe this ceremony. All the villagers gather in this ground in their best cloths with great enthusiasm, and expectation that their cock will emerge winner. The male folks will arrive with cocks in their hands. A large circle is drawn on the ground; in the middle of which the cockfight will take place while outside and around it, the male folks gather to watch, in clan wise order. It is a taboo for the female folks to be anywhere near it when the fight is going on. So they watch from certain distance. The taboo arises from the fact that the ground where the blood of the cocks is being shed is considered to be a battle ground where the battle is going on, and where a female cannot participate.

The cockfight ceremony cannot begin before the arrival of the chief or his permission. The place of the chief is arranged with a cane chair on which a traditionally woven cloth is placed and is covered with tiger printed traditional cloth. A traditional parachute-like umbrella is tied to a Paah (traditional ornamented spear stick) and put above the seat to provide shade to the chief. Brass jars filled with wine and water, a brass plate serving Saali (a combination of certain edible bark, lime, bettle leaves, tobacco leaves and bettle nuts) and a brass bowl is placed on a table near the seat. (All these again are direct influence of the Ahoms. Earlier, the brass utensils used to be traded in from the Ahoms.) A cane mat is spread below the chief's seat for the next-in-position Lowangs and PaangdongJaanwaa (men appointed to tie the pointed weapons to the legs of the cocks). The chief along with these men and other elderly male folks of the village make offerings of jumin thrice during the occasion, to the ancestral spirits while praying thus

- Haahtok HaahdaangTe He
- Haahdaang BaanghoinTe He
- Nekhu Ne-jang Jang Rang Soam Li-me
- NekhuNiam Ba He-e-kio
- Ne Niam-ba Ne Raang-ba
- ThejaRangwo Sen Dangmin, Saanhong Sen Dangmin
- NekhuNiam Ko Wo-jaankhaatHoin-e-ki
- Haahdaang Pe Thepa RangpaSenthram Tham Chhindang-aa
- Aroh Ngame Hoin-e-ki

TRANSLATIONS

- O' ancestral spirits of the earth and our village,
- The beginners of the human society,
- We pray to you as long as we live.
- We are but only following your ways and traditions,
- Let today be a successful day, let the sun shine brightly.
- We are following your laid-down tradition of cockfight,
- So that our village may have a healthy and prosperous year ahead.
- With this prayer we are observing this ceremony.

The population is divided into chief clan and commoners. The chief clan includes the Lowangs and their brother clans, while commoners include all the other clans. The fight will be between the cocks of the chief clan and the commoners. The owner of the cock has the right to choose his opponent cock from the other group. The Jaanwaa of the respective group tie a fatal and sharply pointed knife-like weapon to the left leg of the selected cock, and both the cock are placed in the center, where they fight until one of them is wounded (often fatally) and collapse, or run away. After untying

the weapon, the winner cock is handed over to its owner, while the looser is sliced into two from neck to tail in such a way that the looser gets the part with the head, the winner gets the part of the meat with the tail, and both get a leg each. The tail is then chopped off, tied to a bamboo pole and raised above the bamboo platform in the winner's house for all to see.

In the process of cock fighting and butchering the bird, plenty of blood drips into the soil. This is called Haahroom, which means appeasing the soil and its spirits through this sacrificial blood. It is believed that the blood of these birds will substitute any human blood shed that was to occur in the village through accident or fight etc. in the year ahead. Hence, this is indeed a noble practice according to their belief.

The ceremony goes on until the lunch time, after which people depart for lunch, and in the afternoon, arrive at the swings (made of wild creepers) tied in different parts of the village, again clan wise. This is an entertainment tradition observed for youth meetings, introductions and friendship. Many of such introductions lead to marriage.

Day 4 Khaakchha-ja: On the fourth day the usual ceremony of the third day is repeated. The remaining cocks find their opponents and fight as on the third day, till the lunch time. In the afternoon, people again go to the swing areas for entertainment. However in the evening, only young boys and girls are left behind to observe the ceremony of bidding farewell to the swings with folksongs and to cut down the three days old creeper swings. Apart from this the belief and observations of the day remain the same as on the third day. The cutting down of the swings symbolizes the end of the ritualistic part of the festival.

Day 5 Apiantong-ja: This is a taboo day. On this day, people estrange themselves from jhum and other intensive manual works. They are supposed to take rest after the hectic festive days. However the young boys and girls (even married ones in case of male folk) will go to the river for a picnic called Jaanchho Paangmih Jokaat, meaning young girls' and boys' picnic. The boys are supposed to catch fishes on this occasion and present them to the girls to take home to their parents and thus create an impression. It is again to be noted that the village youths go in four different picnic groups, i.e. clan wise. The boys from one clan will invite the girls from the opposite or marriageable clan to the picnic. No brother and sister, or boys and girls from brotherly clans can go in one picnic. Many get to know each other on this occasion, which later mature into matrimony. Some elderly men also accompany the groups to guide them.

CONCLUSIONS

However, it is to be noticed in today's age that many of the mentioned traditions are sparingly practiced or practiced with certain changes, as convenient to the modern needs and situations. For example, many of the traditions like wankhit by rubbing bamboo pieces together has been replaced by the easier method of lighting new fire with match sticks. Many does not go to the Jhum on the second day as they have either turned government servant or have different source of income and doesn't practice Jhum anymore, or their clan-head may not be practicing it anymore. It may be so, because many of the Jhums have been turned into tea plantation areas today. However there are clans and families, and even villages who loyally continue to follow the long tested traditions. In case of the cockfight ceremony and the swing entertainment, they are still believed and followed with great enthusiasm akin to excitement in Borduria village.

Preservation of culture as a grave need of the hour , the rituals and traditions of the Chhalivan festival look imperative to be cherished and performed by the upcoming generations .School education , particularly English language teaching and learning, can be innovatively customized to help in the cultural preservation and promotion endeavour while contributing to the enhancement of academic performances of the students with folk culture and festivals and songs and

prayers used during the festivals like the Chhalivan Loku of the Noctes properly translated into English and brought into the textbooks and examination and evaluation exercises to impart to the Nocte students the rich and endearing indigenous flavour of their surroundings and ceremonies with the comforting familiarity of the contexts that lie powerfully described in the lesson contents.

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